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AUTHOR	Bechtold, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

As the world has evolved during the past century, so has the nature of career counseling. In the past, the profession focused predominantly on a directive and assessment-driven approach to career development that favored matching clients with the "right" job in order to facilitate their occupational decisions. In recent years, however, numerous voices have championed a broader view of career development that is more holistic in nature and supports a kaleidoscope of new ideas. At the core of these ideas is an awareness that career counseling can and should be more creative in nature. This chapter introduces the applications of theatre techniques and metaphors to individual and group career counseling. It lays the foundation for this topic by first discussing how drama has historically been used in the helping professions, then moves on to exploring how drama-based interventions and metaphors can be integrated into alternative and holistic approaches to career counseling. (GCP)

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by
Patricia Bechtold

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All the World's A Stage: Using Theatre in Career Counseling

Patricia Bechtold

Introduction

As the world has evolved during the past century so has the nature of career counseling. In the past the profession focused predominantly on a directive and assessment-driven approach to career development that favored matching clients with the "right" job in order to facilitate their occupational decisions (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002). In recent years, however, numerous voices have championed a broader view of career development that is more holistic in nature and supports a kaleidoscope of new ideas, everything from the value of life story, to the recognition of the part spirituality plays, to the importance of luck and serendipity.

At the core of these new ideas is an awareness that career counseling can and should be more creative in nature. In fact, several authors have suggested that some clients find traditional and linear career counseling interventions to be dry, boring, and ultimately unsuccessful in advancing client growth (Heppner, O'Brien, Hinkelman, & Humphrey, 1994; Lloyd, 1997). As a result, our profession is now rich with alternative and non-traditional interventions, including journaling, metaphor analysis, life mapping, collaging, and a host of other arts-based strategies. Interestingly enough, however, few if any arts-based interventions currently in use trace their origins to the artistic discipline of theatre and drama.

Purpose of Program

The lack of drama-based interventions is something of a mystery, given the fact that theatre has the power to transform people and their lives. With this in mind, I began developing and using drama-based interventions five years ago and was excited by the enthusiastic responses of clients. Not only were the interventions active and experiential, they seemed to help people quickly get in touch with personal meaning, deeply held values, and obstacles. Furthermore, they appeared to build client confidence, self-esteem, and hopefulness. In fact, I was so inspired by the powerful combination of theatre and career counseling that I wrote a short play that

tells the stories of people in career transition, which I've performed at conferences, workshops, events, and classes. In short, I have embraced international director Peter Brooks' contention that theatre "is about giving everyone a taste of being finer in their feelings, clearer in their way of seeing things, deeper in their understanding, than in their everyday isolation and solitude."

Consequently, the goal of my ICDC workshop is to introduce participants to the applications of theatre techniques and metaphors to individual and group career counseling. Similarly, this paper lays the foundation for this topic by first discussing how drama has historically been used in the helping professions, then moves on to exploring how drama-based interventions and metaphors can be integrated into alternative and holistic approaches to career counseling.

A Brief History of Drama and the Helping Professions

Primitive societies used performance, pantomime, and play-acting during rituals and ceremonies, and early humans made the connection that theatre supported emotional hardiness and healing. According to Kellerman (1992), "Dramatic impersonation has existed almost as long as civilization....It is not surprising, therefore, that these techniques have been harnessed as a part of the healing process and put to use in psychotherapy" (p. 11). The most well known use of theatre with psychotherapy can be traced to Jacob Moreno, the founder of psychodrama (Blatner, 2000). Moreno, a psychiatrist and colleague of Sigmund Freud, also directed and performed with an improvisational theatre group. His experiences convinced him that the process of improvisation had potential as a therapeutic intervention, which resulted in his development of psychodrama, a complex, structured method of group therapy. The basic elements and roles of psychodrama include the protagonist – the client who agrees to portray a situation from his or her life; the auxiliaries – group members who may take on both the roles of people in the protagonist's life or other parts of the protagonist's personality; the audience – group members who don't participate in the action but watch as it unfolds; and the director – the therapist or counselor who directs the action (Blatner, 2000).

Throughout the years, many drama-based interventions have clustered under the umbrella of psychodrama, including drama therapy, clinical role-playing, creative dramatics, and improvisational theatre (Kellerman, 1992). In spite of the difficulty in pinning it down, however, Kellerman has attempted to define psychodrama, and said:

> [It] is a method in which clients are encouraged to continue and complete their actions through dramatization, role playing, and dramatic self-presentation. Both verbal and non-verbal

> communications are utilized. A number of scenes are enacted, depicting, for example, memories of specific happenings in the past, unfinished situations, inner dramas, fantasies, dreams, preparations for future risk-taking situations, or unrehearsed expressions of mental states in the here and now. (p. 20)

However it is defined, it is clear that psychodrama and its cousins facilitate the process of moving clients forward toward insight and action. Specifically, drama-based techniques help people improve their interpersonal skills and relationships, strengthen their abilities to perform personal life roles and gain flexibility between those roles, extend the depth and breadth of their inner experiences, solve problems, set goals, clarify values, and tell their stories (Blatner, 2000). Although these techniques are often traditionally used in response to such issues as trauma, addiction, grief, posttraumatic stress disorder, and family of origin concerns, there is a place for them in the tool kit of career counselors. As such, the next section of the paper will explore definitions, strategies and suggestions for applying drama-based techniques to career counseling.

Definitions and Techniques: Improvisation, Acting As-If, Role Play, and Role Reversal

Improvisation is at the heart of most theatre interventions. According to Bergren, Cox, & Detmar (2002), it is in our nature to improvise and we do it everyday. It is a process "in which something new and exciting is created in a moment of spontaneity – a flash of discovery ignited by a spark of inspiration" (Bergren, Cox, & Detmar, p. 7). When we ask a client to play a role in an imaginary job interview or a discussion with a supervisor, we are asking them to improvise, to cut loose from the reality of the present moment and engage in unscripted action. Improvisation carries us into imaginary circumstances, and an essential ingredient of traditional improvisational theatre is that actors and audience work together to create a new world of possibilities. In a counseling setting, client and counselor take on these roles, and co-create this new world.

If improvisation is at the heart of this new world of possibilities, then "acting as-if" is the genetic building material. When a client agrees to act as-if they are in a job interview, they open the door for improvisation to begin. Acting as-if is a powerful stimulus for imagination and action, and helps people embrace the possibility of future desired events. Indeed, Jacob Moreno believed that acting as-if was a lever toward self-actualization that energized and unified the self and brought newness and vivacity to feelings (Blatner, 2000).

One of the most well known uses of acting as-if, with which many

counselors are familiar, is the role play. During a role play, behavior is portrayed as if it were real, enabling clients to reenact past situations in the present or enact future situations and fantasize about the outcomes. Role play provides a way for individuals to expand various parts of themselves, revisit and restructure past stories and life events, and become more comfortable with future roles (Blatner, 2000).

Similar to role play, role reversal requires clients to take on and experience the roles of other people. Kellerman (1992) has asserted that role reversal helps people gain empathy, insight, and encouragement by raising awareness levels, which give the client "an experience which is sufficiently meaningful to produce a lasting impact" (p. 91).

The quartet of techniques listed above – improvisation, acting as-if, role play, and role reversal – can be integrated to form the basis for career counseling interventions. An overview of three of these interventions follows, with suggested guidelines for successful use.

1. *If I Had Ten Lives To Live.* Prior to using this technique in a counseling session, assign the client the homework of making a list of at least 10 lives she might be interested in or curious about. Explain that it is important to resist censoring herself even if she thinks a particular life is unrealistic. Although the result of this activity is sometimes the identification of a life that the client truly wants to lead, the real goal is to capture underlying themes that are related to client interests, values, and skills. Additionally, it is not necessary to think of these lives as careers or jobs; while some clients will list specific careers such as "owner of a bed and breakfast" or "airplane pilot," others will take a broader approach and list such lives as "philanthropist" or "world traveler." Fortunately, the exercise works either way.

   Once the client has made her list, ask her to improvise and act as-if she was living each life. Asking three key open-ended questions helps clients to imagine these lives: "What makes this life satisfying?" "How do you feel when you are living this life?" and "What is your favorite way to spend your day in this life?" Encourage clients to use "I" statements, such as "I am" or "I feel." While clients are speaking, it is helpful to make note of key words and phrases, although the counselor is as much a part of the improvisation as the client is, staying in the moment and reflecting back the content of client statements in order to help the client gain clarity and insight. Invariably clients will speak poignantly and powerfully about their imagined lives, and themes will begin to emerge.

   At the end of the improvising session, both client and counselor review what was said to identify and focus on important themes.

These themes form the framework for future work together, including exploration of any internal or external obstacles clients expect will make it difficult for them to work and live in ways that reflect the themes. Once clients move past such barriers, the themes provide a benchmark that clients can refer back to as they are setting career/life goals and moving towards them. It is common for the themes to vary from the specific, such as "to live by the ocean," to the general, such as "to be an entrepreneur."

2. *Yes...And!* According to Bergren, Cox, & Detmar (2002), "one of the most basic and vitally important tenets of improvisation is rooted in the ancient ritual of agreement" (p. 91). During improvisational theatre performances, players who agree to say "yes, and" increase their momentum and trust, thus opening the door to discovery and action. Frequently in career counseling, however, clients feel blocked from moving forward to discovery and action, and these blocks play out in the form of client statements starting with "yes, but..." By actively encouraging clients to substitute "yes, and" in its place, they begin to see options in a more positive light. One particularly enlightening way to help clients explore both obstacles and options is to first role play "yes, but," where the counselor and client must start each sentence with these words after an initial suggestion is made. A typical exchange might go like this:

Counselor: So it sounds like you're ready to do some research on travel writing and sign up for that upcoming class.

Client: Yes, but I'm pretty sure that it would be impossible to make a living doing that kind of work.

Counselor: Yes, but you never will know the outcome if you don't take some action, such as showing up at the class.

Client: Yes, but I really doubt that particular class will focus on Italy, which is what I'm really interested in writing about.

End the role play after about one minute, and ask the client how she feels about the conversation. Clients typically respond that they feel frustrated or confused, which opens the door to further exploration of obstacles and self-limiting beliefs that the client may be experiencing. For the second round, both counselor and client must start the sentence with "yes, and" after the initial suggestion is made. Invariably the exchange will be more positive:

Counselor: So it sounds like you're ready to do some research on

travel writing and sign up for that upcoming class.

Client: Yes, and although I'm a little uncertain about where it will lead, I'm keeping my mind open to the possibilities.

Counselor: Yes, and even if it doesn't turn out the way you hoped it would, you may still discover some new information that will lead to something else.

Client: Yes, and I'm thinking of talking to the instructor about travel writing in Italy, if it's not covered in the class.

Once the second round is finished, process with the client the differences between the two exchanges. Clients frequently report that the second round felt easier and less stressful. Explore these concepts with the client, and develop a plan to take a "yes, and" approach to future obstacles.

3. *Conversation With Someone I Admire.* Prior to using this technique in a counseling session, assign the client the homework of making a list of at least five people she admires, living or dead, real or fictional. Begin the improvisation by asking the client to take on the role of the person she admires, while the counselor takes on the role of the client. In this role, the counselor asks the admired person a series of questions: "What do you see as my strengths and positive traits?" "How can I overcome the obstacles I worry about in making my dreams come true?" "What advice and words of wisdom do you have for me as I move forward in my journey?" Process the activity after the client has had a chance to play the role of each person on her list. As you explore the identified strengths and positive traits, notice if the client believes she shares strengths and traits with the person she admires, which is frequently the case. Brainstorm how she might harness these traits and pay more attention to them. When discussing strategies to overcome obstacles and reviewing the advice of the admired person, focus on the words of the admired person and their effect on the client. I have heard Winston Churchill pronounce, "Never give up," Garth Brooks drawl, "Go for it, honey," and Oprah Winfrey insist, "It's never too late!" As the client anchors these strong and supportive voices within her, she realizes that they originate with her, and that she has the ability to call them up whenever she needs them.

As seen in the three examples above, theatre techniques can form the basis for dynamic career counseling interventions to which clients respond enthusiastically. Similarly, the metaphor of theatre also resonates with most clients, and provides the basis for a holistic approach to career development.

In his play *As You Like It,* Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." Shakespeare's words support Super's (1980) theory that people "play" on a number of different stages throughout their lives, as well as Brown's (1996) theory that people take on a number of different roles on those stages, some of which satisfy their values, others which do not. Although these concepts may seem abstract to clients, they can be concretized for many people because almost everyone has attended a concert, play, or other type of performance.

When discussed in these terms, people relate to the idea of performers and stages. They have experienced the exuberance and energy of a sold-out performance, as well as the strain and labor of a spottily attended performance. They instinctively understand the difference in satisfaction levels between the two, and it then becomes a small step for them to consider how this applies to their own lives: the roles that they play, as well as the stages on which they play them. In order to personalize this concept, I present clients with the idea that they "act" in their own theatre-in-the-round, which consists of a six stages: work, play/leisure, relationships/connections, place/environment, wellness, and mission. Clients naturally know which roles on which stages are fulfilling and meaningful, and which roles produce conflict and tension.

In combination with a traditional values card sort, this intervention enables clients to quickly see where their values are being met and where they're not. Furthermore, it recognizes their need to honor all life roles, not simply the work roles, and provides them with a foundation for action-planning and goal-setting in all life areas. Finally, it helps clients embrace Super's (1980) definition of career: "the course of events which constitute a life; the sequence of occupations and other life roles which combine to express one's commitment to work in his or her total pattern of self-development" (p. 282).

Conclusion

Although theatre and drama are infrequently combined with career counseling, they hold promise for the future because they emphasize exploration and action, balance fantasy and reality, and foster multiple

possibilities. The use of theatre in the helping professions has come a long way since its first formal and structured use in psychodrama. For the most part, however, the possibilities of combining theatre and drama with career counseling have yet to be fully explored. Indeed, if they are to take their place beside other alternative and non-traditional career counseling techniques, counselors must be willing to embrace them and experiment with them. Early on in my own use of these techniques, one of my peers admonished me that clients would resist such techniques and would ultimately find them useless. Happily, I continued trying, and discovered just the opposite – my clients are excited to try these strategies. I suspect that if counselors are genuinely enthusiastic about these interventions, then clients will willingly "play" along and find the benefit within them. And, since creative and forward-thinking individuals populate our profession, the future looks bright!

Summary of Contents

In recent years, the field of career counseling has embraced a host of alternative and non-traditional interventions, many of them arts-based. Surprisingly, few of these interventions trace their origins to the artistic discipline of theatre and drama, in spite of the fact that it has the power to transform people and their lives. This paper explores both the historical uses of theatre and drama in the helping professions, as well as its current practical and metaphorical applications to career counseling interventions. The paper focuses on four drama-based techniques – improvisation, acting as..., role play, and role reversal – that form the basis for three interventions. Each intervention is described, with suggested guidelines for successful use. Finally, the paper concludes by explaining how theatre metaphors can provide the foundation for a holistic approach to career development.

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